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Academic Foresights

Post-Cold War Order

How do you analyze the present situation of the post-cold war order?

Some twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the contemporary world order is:

- unipolar as far as the structure of the interstate system is concerned, relatively to the power configuration among major state-actors,
- uniform as far as the nature of international society is concerned, relatively to the set of norms and institutions regulating international relations.

To assert that the structure of an interstate system is unipolar is to claim that there exists only one major power benefiting from such a gap in material resources that the other states are led to behave the way the major power wants them to behave or, at least, in a way unlikely to threaten the major power's national interest. Put differently: unipolarity prevails as long as secondary powers are unable and unwilling to replace an imbalanced distribution of power resources by a more balanced, either bipolar or multipolar, distribution of power resources (1).

For more than twenty years now, this has been the case. As for the traditional conception of power as a resource, suffice it to say that concerning economic resources expressed at the official exchange rate in US dollars, the GNP of the second biggest world economy, that is, China, amounted to 7 298 billion dollars and as such represented less than 50 % of America's GNP in 2011, which amounted to 15 290 billion dollars (2); concerning military resources, America's military expenditures amounted to 711 billion dollars and were more important than the financial resources dedicated to military budgets by China, Russia, Great Britain, France, India, Japan, Italy, and Brazil taken together. What about the more modern conception of power as influence? (3) American primacy in the global distribution of capabilities is so huge that secondary powers are discouraged to adopt a balancing behavior: there is no internal balancing as all the secondary powers, far from increasing their proper military resources, do nowadays dedicate less resources to military expenditures than during the Cold War, which is tantamount to saying that America's military advantage is higher than it used to be some twenty years ago; external balancing is just as non-existent, as neither any formal alliance nor any informal coalition has been established by secondary states with a view to counterbalance America's preponderance (4).

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This unipolar structure is mirrored in the nature of the contemporary international society. Defined as a set of states having established common rules and institutions because of their sharing common interests and values, an international society is likely to be either a pluralist one, if first and foremost common interests incite the states concerned to cooperate together, or a solidarist one, if basically a collective identity is at the roots of accepted norms (5).

Throughout the Cold War, the pluralist version of international society prevailed: due to the fall in status of European powers, to decolonization and America's own anti-colonial past, as well as to the counter-models put forward by the USSR and Third World countries, distinctions between Christian/European/civilized and heathen/savage/non-civilized peoples, which in past centuries had governed relations between states belonging to the international society and entities considered to be beyond the line, were abandoned, and sovereign equality was granted to any member state of the UN, whatever its domestic regime and ideological values (6).

Things changed towards the end of the eighties, when America, thanks to its material preeminence, succeeded in reinventing a more restrictive international society, the so-called international community, based on human rights as the new standard of civilization and liberal democracy as the benchmark of fully legitimate statehood. Neoliberal interpretation of international norms stressed the right to interfere as opposed to the non-interference principle, human security as opposed to national security, and responsibility to protect as opposed to domestic jurisdiction, thus legitimating military operations waged by American-led coalitions against regimes accused of inappropriate behaviour – from Yugoslavia to Iraq and Libya – as well as state-building policies, democracy makers' new *mission civilisatrice* – from Bosnia to Timor-Leste and Afghanistan (7).

Both, unipolar and uniform, the post-Cold War order is a one-dimensional world, in the sense of Herbert Marcuse's critical theory (8). Eternal, rather than perpetual, peace is prevailing, synonymous with the graveyard of agonistic politics: in the figurative sense for insiders of the international society whose conflicts are managed as post-modern problems, in the literal sense for outsiders whose revisionisms are punished as pre-modern antiquities.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

Over the short run, we can expect the international society to ebb back to a more pluralist version. At least for what concerns the afore mentioned concrete policies of Western states: given the economic crisis they have been struggling with for four years now, given the set-backs their state-building policies have been suffering notably in Iraq

and Afghanistan, the US and, more generally, Western powers, will be led to adopt low profile policies rather than messianic crusades in their relations with non-democratic regimes and collapsed states. The re-election of Barack Obama, a fairly reluctant crusader (9), will favour a more prudent stance, all the more so since he is aware that imperial overstretch and imperialist hubris may contribute to America's relative decline: both directly, because of their financial costs, and indirectly, as dissatisfied secondary powers who feel threatened by these policies may be tempted to adopt balancing behaviours likely to undermine the existing unipolar order over the long run.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

As a matter of fact, the contemporary interstate structure will eventually come to an end over the long run. While China is still weak today, a look at the evolution of China's GNP during the last two decades leads to the overwhelming conclusion that, sooner or later, China will match America's economic resources: whereas the Chinese GNP merely represented 6.8 % of America's GNP in 1991, it grew up to 10.9 % in 1996, 12.9 % in 2001, 20.3 % in 2006, and 48.3 % in 2011.

China will be America's next peer competitor. It will even be America's first genuine contender, given that the USSR was basically a poor power, with huge military resources developed on a weak economic basis, which was the ultimate reason why the USSR lost the Cold War, just as World War One revealed the Tsarist Russia to be but a giant with feet of clay. China will be a serious challenge to America's primacy precisely because until today it did not commit the mistake consisting in dedicating too important a part of its economic richness to military expenditures. Once Beijing will have consolidated its economic basis, it will bring its political and strategic ambitions into line with its economic dynamism, a hypothesis about to be corroborated by China's new maritime and spatial ambitions and by the most recent figures showing China is significantly increasing its military budget.

The unipolar structure will give way to a transition or parity phase. Unipolarity being synonymous with stability (10), a transition or parity phase logically implies higher risks of instability and, ultimately, of war. To cope with these risks, two strategies are possible from an American point of view:

- a first strategy could consist in the engagement of a progressively transformed China, betting on the conjecture that China, once democratic, would be a satisfied power unlikely to try to change the existing order by resorting to force: this strategy would hinge upon a liberal view of international politics relying on the Kantian inspired democratic peace theory (11);
- an alternative policy would rely upon a more classical offshore-balancing strategy aiming at containing China's rise thanks to already existing regional alliances and

aiming at containing China's rise thanks to already existing regional alliances and new coalitions to come, notably with India, in order to impede China's rise to a regional hegemonic status: such a strategy would be based on a realist view of international politics as a never ending Machtpolitik (12).

Whatever the strategy chosen, we can await the contemporary one-dimensional world to transform in a new great game with East Asia as the core of world politics to come.

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Notes:

- (1) For a detailed analysis, both conceptual and empirical, of unipolarity, see J. Ikenberry, M. Mastanduno, & W. Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- (2) The figures we use are estimations by the CIA in its CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>
- (3) On the concept of power, see the synthetic presentation by M. Barnett & R. Duvall, «Power in International Politics », *International Organization*, 59 (1), January 2005, p. 39-75.
- (4) The distinction between internal and external balancing is made, notably, by K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979, p. 168.
- (5) On the concept and various types of international society, see the writings of the English School of International Relations, first and foremost H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, Basingstoke, McMillan, 1977, and A. Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, London, Routledge, 1992.
- (6) See C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (1950), New York, Telos Press, 2003, and W. Grewe, *The Epochs of International Law*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2000.
- (7) See G. Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, and I. Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- (8) H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964.
- (9) On B. Obama's foreign policy vision influenced by R. Niebuhr's 'Christian realism', see G. Vandal, *La Doctrine Obama. Fondements et aboutissements*, Québec, Presses de L'Université du Québec, 2011.
- (10) See W. Wohlforth, « The Stability of a Unipolar World », *International Security*, 24 (1), Spring 1999, p. 5-41.
- (11) On democratic peace theory, see, notably, M. Brown et al (eds), *Debating the Democratic Peace: An International Security Reader*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1996.
- (12) This strategy is favored by an offensive realist such as J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, Norton, 2001.

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